DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 293 517 IR 013 041

AUTHOR Gray, Ann
TITLE Video Recorders in the Home: Women's Work and Boy's Toys.
PUB DATE Jul 86
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the International Television Studies Conference (London, England, July 10-12, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Audience Analysis; Broadcast Television; *Family Life; *Females; Foreign Countries; Individual Differences; Interviews; *Leisure Time; Technological Advancement; Television Research; *Television Viewing; *Use Studies; Videotape Recorders
IDENTIFIERS *England (Yorkshire)

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the domestic world of home and family life as it examines important factors that bear on the use of television and video by women. Based on interviews with women of different ages, economic status, educational backgrounds, family circumstances, and general social environments, the paper describes the following feminine reactions to television and video viewing: (1) women feel alienated from the video recorder and rely on their male partner or children to operate it; (2) the adult male and children, but not the woman, generally have their own tapes which they can use in any way they wish; (3) women are often doing something else at the same time as viewing, e.g., knitting, sewing, ironing, reading; (4) with the exception of their favorite programs, women feel that watching television is a waste of time and that they could be doing something more useful; (5) women resent the fact that the television goes on as soon as the family comes home; (6) if there is a conflict over what is to be watched, women may use a portable television in another room; and (7) there are various viewing contexts which create sets of expectations and contribute/detract from the pleasures of different viewers. (10 end notes) (CGD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED293517

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ANN GRAY

VIDEO RECORDERS IN THE HOME:

Women's Work and Boy's Toys

Paper presented to
the 1986 International Television Studies Conference

IR013041

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Robert Paterson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

'He's the only one who knows how to work the video'

The Queen on Prince Andrew

The sub- title of this paper is an indication of what I have found to be two of the most significant issues when looking at how people use video recorders in the home. The trend of television audience research has been moving away from the notion of a largely passive mass audience sitting glued to the screen in the living room towards a conception of more active and atomised audiences' implicitly suggested in the question 'how do people watch TV?', or rather, as I believe we can no longer treat TV in isolation, 'how do people watch TV and video?' One of the first problems that this question introduces is the category 'people' within which women are subsumed. If this category is used, it blinds us yet again to the uneveness of TV and video watching, particularly in terms of gender as men and women occupy different positions within the domestic context. Even in these days of high unemployment amongst the male population in Britain, and increasing, albeit mainly part-time employment, in the service industries for women, evidence strongly suggests that women are still responsible for the day to day household chores, child care, food provision and preparation; little has changed in these so called enlightened days in the great indoors.

It is this so-called private world of home and family upon which we must focus our attention if we are to understand the ways in which people watch television

and video, an area which has previously been rather neglected.[2] My research is being based upon my own interviews with women whose age, social position and family circumstances differ, my aim being to move towards an understanding of the important factors which bear upon video and television use for women. This paper will focus on the domestic context, suggesting ways in which we might begin to conceptualise this, how this relates to different popular texts and the pleasures and displeasures which both afford to women.

Video recorders are the most significant innovation in home entertainment technology since television and are often seen, as television was in the 50s and 60s, as yet another leisure-time facility which reduces the necessity for people to participate in public leisure consumption. Cinema is most obviously directly referred to in this line of argument. Although one wouldn't want to accept this cause and effect notion uncritically - there are many other factors involved in what seems to be the trend towards the 'privatisation' of leisure; the decrease in disposable income for large numbers of the population would seem to be the major factor, but lack of safety on the streets after dark for women is pertinent here - we cannot ignore the fact that, for instance, most of the Asian cinemas in Britain have closed down since the coming of the video recorder and we are constantly reminded of the steady decline in cinema attendances - British Film Year notwithstanding. It would seem that the home is increasingly becoming defined as the place for leisure and entertainment and I would argue that this definition has different consequences for men and women. As women are responsible for and perform most of the household tasks, their workplace - the domestic world of home and family - is also their leisure

space. This convergence of work/leisure into the domestic sphere is, of course, not new for women, but is becoming more intensified, and as a result women often do not think of themselves as having any 'leisure' at all. Many of their so-called 'leisure' activities involve some kind of contribution to the welfare of her family, eg. knitting, sewing, gardening as well as activities such as specialist cooking and food research. The complexity of women's own attitudes towards home-based leisure in general and television and video viewing in particular must be attended to as must the struggles which go on within the dynamic and often chaotic processes of family life around the screen in the corner before we can ask the question 'what happens when women watch TV and video?' A more appropriate way of asking that question might be to say 'how do women get to watch TV and video and under what particular circumstances?' as we cannot assume that the viewer/text relationship is unproblematic; right of access to the screen is often used in bargaining; it is used in order to exercise power and control across age and gender and for many women it is struggled for and gained simply as a way of marking out some time for themselves; 'this is **my** programme and **my** time, leave me alone for half an hour', and as a special treat to which the completion of household chores will lead 'I always sit down and watch *Falcon Crest* its my treat, but I wouldn't enjoy it if I hadn't done my work.' Thus, what is traditionally known as womens' work - and this is one of those common sense phrases that is not a myth, but is grounded in concrete practices - can be seen as a strongly determining factor in the ways in which women consume television and video, and in shaping their feelings and attitudes towards their own viewing practices.

As video recorders have now entered the domestic scene - nearly 40% of TV owning households in Britain have access to VCR - what difference has this made, if any, to the patterns of viewing? Again, this question masks and oversimplifies what is at stake here. The title of this paper refers to 'boys' toys' and I will now turn to video recorders as pieces of **technology** before discussing the use which is made of them and the kinds of things which are watched on them. Domestic technology has tended to be overlooked by researchers in favour of technology in the workplace, particularly in relation to gender. Cynthia Cockburn[3] has consistently worked in this area and suggests that new technology, far from providing the utopia of equal opportunities for men and women, has tended to reproduce traditional work patterns across gender; in this way, as Jan Zimmerman[4] suggests, old ideas become encoded in new technologies. When we consider domestic technology and the so-called labour saving devices which are, in theory, available to all in our consumer society, it is surprising to note that, as American research[5] shows, the full-time 'housewife' of the nineteen seventies spent as much time at housework as did her grandmother fifty years earlier, inspite of an increase in household technology and its wider diffusion. However, the expectations of her job have become much greater - she is expected to provide a much more sophisticated 'life style' for her family, but in doing so she is just as tied to her traditional role as her foresisters. The burden is increased, of course, when women seek employment outside the home. Domestic technology is inscribed with a gender bias and one question which throws these embedded biases into high relief is to ask people to think of pieces of equipment in the home as coloured either pink or blue.[6] This produces almost uniformly pink

irons and blue electric drills, and also some strange mixtures - the washing machine is pink on the outside, but the motor inside is usually blue. The same can be said for the car - although this is lilac on the outside, with both male and female drivers, the engine is blue. Gershuny[7] has produced a typology of the uses made of domestic technology and the gender split can be seen in terms of the function of the pieces to equipment. The blues tend to be used for one-off jobs with a highly visible end product (e.g. electric drill, electric saw, electric sander, etc.) whereas the pinks are used in the execution of day to day chores, with an end product which is often immediately consumed (e.g. the cooker, the washing machine, the iron, etc.) In this connection also it is useful to think of the terms 'tools' and 'utensils' - hammer, screwdriver, saw, as against egg whisk, can opener and bread knife and the implied gender division in these terms. In Gershuny's typology there is what he calls a neutral cluster which is neither male nor female specific and includes hi-fi, radio and television. We could think of these items as androgynous, but when a new piece of technology within this cluster is purchased or rented, it is generally assumed that the male of the household has the knowledge of how these things work.

Gershuny's typology does not include any reference to video recorders, but let us assume that these would come within the androgenous cluster. However, my research into video use suggests that we cannot regard the VCR as a whole, but must break it down into its different operational elements which reveals that there are certain parts of the video which are lilac (the 'play', 'record' and 'rewind' modes), but other parts which are mainly blue. These are the time

recording facility which allows for pre-setting to record when out of the house and very rarely touched by the women with whom I have spoken, and the deep indigo remote control switch which, as Dave Morley says is a 'highly visible symbol of condensed power relations', almost always controlled by the males of the household and a source of irritation and resentment for the women.

Women routinely operate extremely sophisticated pieces of domestic technology which often in the first instance require the study and application of a manual - consider the complex nature of most modern sewing machines - yet many women feel alienated from things like the video recorder and especially the timer controls, having to rely on either their male partners or their children to record certain programmes for them, or (as is often the case) they consider it to be more bother than it is worth. Given that one of the main attractions and selling points of the VCR is its potential for increased choice of both content and time management, for those women who do not feel they can operate the recorders, this notion of choice is rather spurious. Indeed this is reflected in the ways in which blank tapes are distributed and used within families; more often than not the adult male and the children of the household will each have their own tape which they can use in any way they wish, but it is extremely rare for a woman to have her own tape in this way. When it comes to questions of 'archiving' there are often 'his things' and 'films for them', but hardly ever a film or programme for 'her', in fact she often doesn't know what is happening to the various tapes and if she has recorded something for herself she has to watch it 'very quickly' before it gets wiped off; hence pre-breakfast or very late night viewing of *Dynasty* is not uncommon. In fact,

the general picture is one of women floating around somewhere on the periphery of the viewing group - not really taking a great part in planning what is on or what might be recorded or hired. When the TV is on and being watched by her family or her male partner, she will often be doing something else at the same time; knitting and sewing are common or even reading, but also ironing is often done to television. With the exception of their favourite programmes, women seem to feel that watching TV is a waste of time and that they could be doing something better or more useful; equally they resent the time which is devoted to television and regret that the TV goes on as soon as her family come home. If there is a conflict over what is to be watched and there is something special which the woman wants to see it is not uncommon for her to use a portable television in another room for her alternative viewing. If, however, she simply does not want to watch anything, going to bed and reading is a fairly common strategy. Reading is an activity enjoyed by many of the women I spoke to; mainly romances, historical romances and family sagas, Mills & Boon, Catherine Cookson, Barbara Taylor Bradford and Judith Krantz being the most popular cited by them. Reading seems to be more readily included in their lives and also does not always carry the same guilt burden as watching TV and video.[8]

For many women TV and video are monopolised by their male partners or their children when they are in the house, and when they are out, guilt takes over as a form of control, especially during the day. It seems that as a result of this marginalisation women either do not watch much TV and video or, when they do they find themselves watching programmes and films which they do not enjoy.

However, there are occasions when viewing takes the form of a discrete 'event', rather than being a part of the daily 'flow' of television and these 'events' tend to involve women in more intense viewing experiences.

The notion of viewing context is, I would argue, crucial to the understanding of what happens when people watch television but I would also wish to argue that the viewing context is not singular, but plural, and that we must identify these different contexts in terms of how they are organised, which members of the household are involved and what particular programmes or films are watched. The very contexts themselves construct sets of expectations and also contribute, or detract from the pleasures involved for different viewers.

The first takes place usually on a weekend evening, Saturday or Sunday, when a film has been hired for male and female partners to watch together; the films hired for this viewing context are largely chosen by the male and tend to have male 'stars' - Clint Eastwood and Sylvester Stallone were strongest contenders here. Indeed, the 'star' is an important criterion in the selection of films for video hire for this particular kind of use. Within this context it is extremely rare that the partners would watch what might be called a 'women's film'. Romance, for example, is a category which men do not seem to like and, therefore is not hired by them, even though they know their female partners do take pleasure in this genre. The exceptions to this were few, but when this did occur it was used as a 'peace offering' from male to female when she had complained of over use of the video, or her exclusion from it. Films such as *Kramer v Kramer* and *Champ* were amongst these 'tokens' and ones which appear to

have had some effect on the male viewers. However, the way in which the women told me of their partner's reaction to these films shows how little men allow their emotions to show; 'well, I think it upset him, but he didn't say' and 'he pretends it doesn't bother him and he laughs at me for crying, but I think films like that do affect him, you know'. The male of the household, therefore, supplies the films which he enjoys, but in doing so he is also defining them as 'good' and worth watching, refusing to express pleasure and involvement in those films which his female partner enjoys. Many of the programmes and films in which a woman takes pleasure are objects of derision, scoffed at by her partner and often by her male children; there is, however, an interesting mother/daughter reproduction of viewing pleasures, just as there is a reproduction of father/son derision. The 'power of definition' is an important factor in family television and video watching, set as it is within structures of power and authority relations between household members and in this way we can see the public world of critical discourse, which largely dismisses women's genres as trivial, brought very firmly into the ' private world' of family life.

The second viewing context I wish to discuss is a female only context where women view alone. In this context the women would normally be watching 'real time' television or occasionally a recorded tape, but never a hired tape, although their male partners would quite often hire a tape to watch whilst alone. I have already indicated earlier that women 'use a TV programme to establish their own time, and this often takes place during the day when, in the case of a woman with very young children, they are asleep or with older children when they are at school or simply in another room. The pleasures

involved in this viewing for women go far beyond those afforded by the texts themselves and can be seen as being the products of those rare times when the busy wife and mother has some time for herself. It is, therefore, in this instance the very context itself which affords pleasure before the pleasures of the text add the icing to the cake, a brief time when she does not have to respond to every demand, but feels justified in saying to her children 'go away I'm watching my programme. One of the most popular day-time programmes cited was *Sons & Daughters*, an Australian imported soap opera, transmitted three afternoons per week in the Yorkshire region. Most of the women preferred to watch this alone, some take the 'phone off the hook to ensure uninterrupted concentration, but would watch it with a friend if they happened to be in each other's houses at the time. Janice Radway in her study of women and romantic fiction[3] talks with regret of the isolated context within which popular romances are consumed by women. Apart from the fact that many of the women I spoke with operated a network of exchange for books between family members and friends which often lead to discussion and comparison, the next viewing context I wish to discuss reveals a more optimistic state of affairs for women.

This third context is again female only, but is one in which several women get together to watch a video which they have hired jointly. This would normally happen during the day when their children were at school. Far from being instrumental in isolating women, it would seem that there is a tendency to communal use of hired videos, mainly on economic grounds, but also on the grounds that the women can watch what they want together without the guilt, the 'male definition' or the distraction of children. The video libraries in the

geographical area of my study are not very good at supplying a wide choice of films which women might enjoy, but some of the women have a good relationship with their video dealer who will alert them to new titles which they might like. One favoured form is that of the long family saga, often running to two or three tapes, to be viewed on separate occasions. This means that the experience is not singular where the narrative is resolved, but the text leaves open the expectation of pleasure for the next time.

I have spent a considerable amount of time with one such group of women and it appears that this difference of openness or closure would seem to affect the way in which the women then discuss the films. They tend not to talk about the 'finished' film, but they do discuss and speculate on the open-ended episodes of films they have seen. Soap operas and prime-time serials provide similar stimulus - there is much neighbourhood and workplace speculation and discussion on the morning after *East Enders*, *Dynasty* or *Dallas* and this openness would seem to offer special pleasures for women. This is analagous to what the women tell me of their reading pleasures. They talk of their bereft feelings when they have finished a book; they feel 'lost' without it and hate the prospect of books coming to an end. Nancy Chodorow's theory of the 'relational self'[10] upon which a woman's socially constructed identity relies, can be applied to the way in which women relate to texts as well as the way in which they relate to their male partners and their children. Women, argues Chodorow, are constructed to look towards a male partner for the completion of their selves, but that male partner is constructed, perversely, to look away and outwards for the completion of himself. Women are constructed to feel

connected to others - their traditional female functions demand this - whereas men are constructed to require separateness. These antagonistic states of connectedness and separateness go a long way towards informing out understanding of why men and women, as they are socially constructed, appear to take pleasure in different popular genres. The open, never ending nature of soap operas guarantee a permanent connection, whilst the thrusting narrative of, say, 'action adventure' films where the hero moves rapidly towards a resolution and a return to equilibrium, always ensure a conclusion and separateness for the viewing subject. The soap opera is never resolved, but the end is continually held off in its complex fictional world.

These viewing contexts, amongst others, have emerged from my discussions with the women and there are remarkable similarities in the ways in which all the women have spoken of their favourite popular genres, in what kinds of ways they are important to them, the pleasures they afford and the desires they accommodate. As I have suggested above, this set of relationships would seem to lend itself to the application of psychoanalytic concepts in the ways in which we might understand the differences between male and female viewing subjects, but this is not sufficient in itself, failing as it does to account for the very important **differences** between the women I have interviewed. These differences are determined by factors such as age, economic status within the family framework, educational background, family circumstances and general social environment. The particular discourses which women inhabit at different times in their lives greatly affect not just their reading of particular texts, but in a more general sense their interaction with popular

fiction in all its complex forms and associated means of consumption. My framework for analysis of my interview texts will be aware of the necessity to attend to the psychological and the social as they intersect within the complex process of television and video use.

ANN GRAY

YORK 1986

NOTES:

1. Evidenced in the IBAs recent *Attitudes to Broadcasting* study 1985.

2. A notable exception to this is Dorothy Hobsons's work on TV and radio; D. Hobson. *Crossroads the Drama of a Soap Opera* Methuen 1982. D. Hobson 'Housewives and the mass media' in Hall, S. Hobson, D. Lowe, A. & Willis, P. (eds) *Culture Media Language* Hutchinson 1981.

3. C. Cockburn *Brothers - Male Dominance and Technological Change* Pluto 1983 and her most recent *Machinery of Dominance - Women, Men and Technical Know-how* Pluto 1985 in which she does address questions of domestic technology. See also W. Faulkner and E. Arnold (eds) *Smothered by Invention: Technology in Women's Lives* Pluto 1985.

4. J. Zimmerman 'Technology and the future of women: haven't we met somewhere before?' *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, Vol.4, No.3, 1981 p.355.

5. C.A. Thrall. 'The conservative use of modern household technology', *Technology and Culture* 23 1982 pp 175-94.

6. I am grateful to Cynthia Cockburn for this idea which she shared at a seminar at York University in June 1985.

7. J.I. Gershuny, 'Household Tasks and the Use of Time' in S. Wallman and associates, *Living in South London*, Gower 1982.

8. It became very obvious after only two or three interviews that the notion of 'intertextuality' is important in terms of the consumption of popular fiction and my study has been extended to accommodate this fact.

9. J. Radway *Reading the Romance - Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* The University of North Carolina Press 1984.

10. N. Chodorow *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and The Sociology of Gender* University of California Press 1978.